



# Educational Environments at Housatonic Community College

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## Physical Environment

Housatonic Community College's campus consists of two buildings, a parking garage, and a large central courtyard that occupy most of a large city block in the heart of downtown Bridgeport.

The physical environment of HCC is extremely conducive to improving student learning and development. HCC has addressed the issue of “wayfinding” by having the campus arranged in a way that students will immediately feel safe and welcomed. The buildings have been designed to prevent new individuals on campus from feeling lost or stupid if it is their first time on the campus. There is a definite and predetermined flow to the campus that urges individuals to go in certain directions. Although Lafayette Hall is dated and shows the wear and tear that schools take on over the years, it is currently undergoing renovations, which will provide a much-needed face-lift. Beacon Hall provides an incredible environment for student learning and development. The issue is that many students choose not to use the resources that HCC has made available.

## Background

Housatonic Community College (HCC) is one of twelve community colleges in Connecticut. It is located in Bridgeport, Connecticut; a city located just one hour away from New York City. There are four different types of environments that when analyzed help to determine the success of students’ learning and development; these environments are the physical, aggregate, constructed, and organizational environments of a higher education institution. The physical environment at HCC provides an excellent environment for learning and development; however the students need to learn to take advantage of the resources that are available. It is important to recognize the aggregate environment of a higher education institution because knowing the types of students that make up a college or university will be helpful for prospective students looking for a perfect fit in a school, for faculty and staff members who aspire for diverse institutions, and for support service staff who need to help college students succeed. It is necessary to consider the constructed environment because it is the perception of the individual, and one situation can have several different perceptions based on the observer. By understanding the constructed environment, one will understand the climate on campus and how individuals perceive the school. The organizational environment of HCC encourages teamwork and collaboration, helps high morale among employees to flourish, and ensures low turnover rates by utilizing reward power.



## Constructed Environment

The constructed environment is the idea that environments influence behavior through the social constructions of those participating in the environment. It is the conscience of the human aggregate. The perception of the environment influences the behavior. Because the constructed environment is the perception of the individual, one situation can have several different perceptions based on the observer. There were noticeable differences in the perception of the HCC environment among the different stakeholders including the Director of Campus Activities, Student Senate President and other students

While staff feel that HCC strives to be student centered, the student perception is that HCC is that it is not student centered and the ideas and wants of the students are often blocked by the administration. Both students and staff noted that while HCC is an ethnically diverse campus, their perception is that diversity is not a part of the campus culture in anyway other than in the different ethnicities that comprise the student population. Students also said that they felt as though their experience at HCC was merely a stepping stone to a traditional, four year institution which is why they were not interested in being involved in campus life outside of academics or attending non-academic programming. Students felt that the campus was friendly, but they did not feel as though they were getting the same experience as if they were at a traditional, four-year institution. These perceptions most certainly have an effect on several areas, which make up the college and university environment scale factors. There are seven distinctive areas, which make up this scale, scholarship, awareness, community, propriety, practicality, campus morale and student-faculty relationships. Students felt as though their feelings and perceptions about HCC did have an impact on the their morale and their desire to forge close relationships with faculty and staff, but they also felt as though attending HCC forced them to excel in their academics in order to gain admission in the future at a traditional institution (Strange and Banning, 2001).

## Aggregate Environment

Environments are transmitted through people, and the dominant features of a particular environment are partially a function of the collective characteristics of the individuals who inhabit it (Strange & Banning, 2001). As we know, no two-college students are the same, but we can use information from individuals to collectively inform us about dominant features of a college or university.

The dynamics of human aggregates on HCC's campus can be seen through the interactional experiences between students and academic departments, student groups, and campus organizations (Strange & Banning, 2001). Clark and Trow define four subcultures on college campuses that can dominate and influence campus environments- the Academic subculture, the Nonconformists, the collegiate subculture, and the Vocational subculture (Strange & Banning, 2001). The dominance of one or more of these subcultures on campus can shape institutional image and culture (Strange & Banning, 2001). The vocational subculture is very much present on HCC's campus. For vocational students a college education is “off-the-job training leading to a diploma and a better job than they could otherwise obtain (Strange & Banning, 2001). When interviewed, most students had an easy response to what they would be doing after earning their degree and every course they took had meaning to their future job position

## Organizational Environment

The organizational environment at Housatonic Community College focuses on seeking to educate students, construct and disseminate knowledge and to serve the community (Strange & Banning, 2001). HCC organizes four Deans under the President of the college; there is the Dean of Students, the Dean of Administration, the Dean of Academics, and the Dean of Outreach. Each Dean has their own staff in which they work together to meet department goals and make sure the college is running efficiently, including an administrative assistant that helps with the daily activities of the office. The Dean's oversee different departments within the college; each department has a director and an entire staff which can include faculty and student workers. Some of the goals are clearly stated missions with target goals and objectives; others are just intuited, consensual understanding about the overall purpose that all work together to complete (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Overall, the organizational environment at Housatonic Community College encourages teamwork, high morale, collaboration, and ensures low turnover rates with reward power. As a result, HCC has created an organizational environment that places student learning and development as a top priority